

Radical openness, incremental design: Maximising the reach of OER capacity development through open principles

Extended Abstract

Background

The Open Education Resource Foundation (OER Foundation) is an “independent, not-for-profit organisation that provides international networking and support for educational institutions, educators and learners to achieve their strategic objectives through Open Education” (OER Foundation, 2021)¹. The OER Foundation is an active participant in the UNESCO OER Dynamic Coalition, hosts the WikiEducator community, co-ordinates the New Zealand Centre for Open Education Practice, and hosts New Zealand’s UNESCO Chair in OER.

Significantly for this presentation, the Foundation also leads implementation of the OER universitas (OERu), an international network of over 40 like-minded partner institutions across five continents, who collaborate to assemble freely accessible, high quality, accredited online courses from open educational resources (OER). The network supports institutions in the developing world by providing free membership through the *OERu Outreach Partnership Programme*.

The OERu course site hosts *Learning in a Digital Age* (LiDA), a core component of which is the OER-capacity-building micro-course, *Open Education, Copyright and Open Licensing in a Digital World*.

Course origins

In 2011, the OER Foundation initiated the collaborative development of the *Open Content Licensing for Educators* (OCL4Ed) micro-course. With funding support from the UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, the course was developed and hosted in an open wiki, with contributions from volunteers in the WikiEducator community, the OpenCourseWare Consortium (now Open Education Global (OEGlobal)) and Creative Commons. Providing a practical introduction to the world of copyright, OER, and creative commons licences, the course was designed to empower educators to legally remix open education materials, and help their institutions to take informed decisions about open content licensing.²

¹ OER Foundation. (2021). *About - OER Foundation*. <https://oerfoundation.org/about/>

² Mackintosh, W. (2013). *Open content licensing for educators: Introduction and course aims*. https://wikieducator.org/Open_content_licensing_for_educators/Course_guide/Introduction

Commencing in March 2011, six cohort offerings of the wiki-based course were facilitated by the OER Foundation until 2014, supporting 3,049 registered learners from more than 90 different countries. Underpinned by the free and open source software practice of “release early, release often”, this phase of the project gave opportunities to refine the course activities and materials in response to the needs of learners.

Evolution

Drawing on this experience, the OER Foundation identified a number of shortcomings in this initial iteration of the course. Many learners were not familiar with navigating wiki-based courses. Replicating the course for re-use by different institutions would be cumbersome, and there were no assessment or credential options for formal academic credit. Moreover, as a standalone micro-course equating to 40 notional learning hours, OCL4Ed was not of sufficient scope to qualify for full course credit.

In 2015, the OERu international network therefore commenced development of the *Learning in a Digital Age* (LiDA) online course, encompassing OCL4Ed and other aspects of digital literacy required for 21st century learning and teaching. An international network of experts and professional educators worked together to investigate course outlines from similar university courses, and identify the foundational requirements for the LiDA curriculum. This process included an open crowdsourcing activity inviting educators to submit comments and concepts for inclusion. This work resulted in the creation of a collection of four openly licensed micro-courses, including *Open Education, Copyright and Open Licensing in a Digital World* (LiDA103), the revised and improved successor to OCL4Ed. While still developed on WikiEducator, the course was now presented to learners through the more intuitive WordPress platform.

The pedagogy underpinning the micro-courses, embracing active learning and open educational practices, is itself designed to promote digital literacy skills and OER capacity, by offering learners both a pathway towards independent learning through the internet, and encouragement to create their own openly licensed digital media. In 2019, LiDA was presented with the Commonwealth of Learning Award for Excellence in Distance Education Materials³.

A number of credentialing pathways have been introduced for the LiDA micro-courses, to give learners multiple options for recognition of their learning. The most basic is digital badging for participation, based on a simple knowledge test. The OER Foundation has also developed an online test for learners to gain a free Certificate of Competency in Copyright and Creative Commons Licensing.

In a ground-breaking example of international cooperation in support of OER, each LiDA micro-course was recognised for assessment through a New Zealand polytechnic’s

³ Commonwealth of Learning. (n.d.). *Award of excellence for open and distance education materials*. <https://www.col.org/about/pan-commonwealth-forum/award-excellence-open-and-distance-education-materials>

micro-credentialing system, and the four combined microcredentials were approved for credit transfer at first-year undergraduate level at OERu partner universities in the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom. The course has also been submitted to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority which has evaluated the Learning in a Digital Age (Micro-credential) delivered by OERu and assessed it to be equivalent to 16 credits (160 notional learning hours) at Level 5 on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

In its current iteration, LiDA has been offered to 7,800 learners. The *Open Education, Copyright and Open Licensing* micro-course is the most popular in the series with 4,821 registrations as of May 2021.

Adoption and adaptation

At Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand, a recognition of the need to boost learners' digital literacy, together with senior managers' strong commitment to OER, has led to LiDA being offered as a self-directed elective course in three of its undergraduate programmes since July 2019. Taking advantage of the flexibility that the OERu course model offers, course materials are accessed directly from the OERu course site, but a more discipline-specific assessment has been introduced for one of the programmes within the Polytechnic's learning management system, in response to learner needs. The new assessment is itself now available for re-use and adaptation under a Creative Commons Share-Alike licence.

Meanwhile, Western Pacific University in Papua New Guinea, an OERu Outreach Partner institution, has introduced LiDA as a required foundation course for all its students, who again access it directly from the OERu site.

The OER Foundation is currently collaborating with OEGlobal to host an instance of the *Open Education, Copyright and Open Licensing* course on OEGlobal's own course site. In another example, the Foundation is collaborating with UNESCO and the ICDE, who are leading a consultation for developing a culturally-appropriate French instance of the *Open Education, Copyright and Open Licensing* micro-course in partnership with the French Ministry of Education, the French Thematic University, and virtual universities of Francophone Africa. On conclusion of this consultation, the course will be published on the OERu open technology infrastructure for re-use by any institution.

Open source and open approaches to support OER

Our key learning at the OER Foundation has been to design for re-use as a principal point of departure, using Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) technologies underpinned by open, transparent and collaborative planning approaches. While this combination of radical openness is not necessarily the path of "least resistance" in the short term, it enables iterative but agile responses for building and sharing open education solutions for the benefit of many organisations in a sustainable way.

Intentionally, the Foundation does not use a learning management system for delivery of courses. Rather, we develop content collaboratively in an open wiki which provides detailed version control for multiple remix scenarios. A collection of wiki pages constituting a micro-course are published to WordPress - an open source content management system - thus enabling any institution to host their own instances of OERu courses at minimal cost. We have developed a component-based ecosystem comprising “best of breed” FOSS interaction technologies (forums, social media, annotation, commenting etc.) with open solutions to aggregate mentions from these distributed technologies into a single course feed. This will enable a demonstrator project for a “federated” collection of institutionally-branded OER course websites for local communities to engage with interactions from other open communities studying OERu courses.

The OEGlobal version of LiDA is a working example of the benefits of this approach. The OEGlobal instance of *Open Education, Copyright and Open Licensing* will be hosted on their own WordPress Multisite at course.oerglobal.org in parallel with the OERu version on its own WordPress installation as course.oeru.org. Forum discussions for the course will be hosted on connect.oerglobal.org, the OEGlobal community site powered by Discourse software. The OERu discussions are hosted on a different instance of Discourse at the forums.oeru.org site. However, the discussion interactions from different sites located around the world will be aggregated into a Twitter-like” feed of learner mentions. This provides a powerful example of a unique global collaboration that would be difficult to replicate using closed solutions.

Conclusion

This presentation has charted the 10-year evolution of a small course on open content licensing for educators into an acclaimed set of micro-courses on learning in a digital age, which has been recognised internationally through micro-credentials and formal university credit. On its journey so far, it has already built the capacity of nearly 8,000 learners in OER, and its current stage of expansion is demonstrating how the OER Foundation’s long-standing commitment to openness in all its forms has secured a pathway for context-specific adoption and adaptation. Meanwhile, the process of refining and adapting the course, both pedagogically and technically, itself continues to develop the capacity, and the passion, of the individuals and institutions involved.